

BOOK REVIEW

ESMOND HARRIS, JEANETTE HARRIS, and N.D.G. JAMES. 2003. **Oak: a British History.** (ISBN 0-9538630-8-5, pbk.). Windgather Press, Ltd., 29 Bishop Road, Bollington, Macclesfield, Cheshire SK10 5NX, UK. (Orders: Distributed by Central Books, 99 Wallis Road, London E9 5LN, UK). US \$30.00, 208 p., 10 col., 49 b/w illus., 7 1/4" × 9 3/4".

This is not a book about the historical significance of oaks in Britain. This is not a study of the many and varied uses that oaks have supplied over the centuries. This is not a guide to the cultivation of oaks and the restoration of aged and historic woodlands. This is not about the myths and symbology that have surrounded the oak since time immortal. *The Oak: A British History* is all of these and more. Written in a easy to read manner which belies the authority behind the text, this will be a classic for years to come.

The oak has always held pride of place amongst trees in Britain. For centuries, its durability, strength and attractiveness have made it the timber of choice. When the British state was forged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these qualities made it a metaphor for the virtues of the nation. This book tells the story of man's use of this wonderful natural resource and argues that oak still has a rich future, both as material and as a key element in an ecologically rich countryside. The authors are concerned with how people have managed and exploited oakwoods over time and with the uses to which oak timber has been put, in ships, furniture and buildings. As practicing foresters, they revisit with an expert's eye the silvicultural techniques of the past—the methods of propagating, raising, managing, coppicing and felling oak through the tree's life, from acorn to standard. They reveal the skills needed to work with oak timber, and tell the story of the great industries of iron-smelting and shipbuilding which relied on the tree. They also explore the myths, symbols and cultural associations that have connected people in Britain with the oak over hundreds of years. An appendix lists over 700 particularly significant oak trees, with notes on their location, present condition and historical connections. This book is a cultural history not only of a tree, but also of a timber. It reclaims the disappearing forestry and carpentry skills of our ancestors and shows how, in an era of climate change, oak can enrich our future as well as our past.

Esmond Harris has spent a lifetime working as a forester, and is a Past Director of the Royal Forestry Society. He wrote *The Guinness Book of Trees* (1981), *Trees* (1986), and *Arbores* (1998). Jeanette Harris is a farmer and author. Together they wrote the best-selling *Reader's Digest Guide to the Trees and Shrubs of Britain* (1981) and *Wildlife Conservation in Managed Woodlands and Forests* (1997). They run a small farm in Cornwall, where their renovation of woodlands won the 2002 Duke of Cornwall's Award for Forestry and Conservation. N. D. G. James, OBE, was President of the Royal Forestry Society and author of several tree books. He died in 1993, having laid the foundations for this book.—Gary Jennings, Botanical Research Institute of Texas, 509 Pecan Street, Fort Worth, TX 76102-4060, U.S.A.